Rose Wagner

Why Preserve Trails?
A Wyoming Perspective

1852

May 9 ...We passed a new made grave today... a man from Ohio. We also met a man that was going back, he had buried his Wife this morning. She died from the effects of measles we have come ten miles today....

June 15 ...Traveled about three miles today and encamped on the account of four sick ones....

June 23 ... Sickness and death in the states is hard but it is nothing to be compared with it on the plains...

—From the diary of Lydia Allen Rudd in Lillian Schlissell, 1982, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, New York, New York: Schocken Books.

The Oregon Trail—and subsequent trails—in 1990 approximately 10 miles south of Douglas, Wyoming. The trails ruts are indicated by darker vegetation. Photo courtesy Richard Collier, Wyoming Division of Cultural Resources.

Thousands of people visited Wyoming for the 1993 Sesquicentennial of the Oregon Trail. In their trek through the state, they saw many of the same sights viewed by Lydia Allen Rudd when she and her husband, Harry, traversed the route in 1852. Following a passage carved out by the more than a quarter of a million pioneers who journeyed across the continent between 1840 and 1870, celebrants arrived by car, plane, bus, or other modern conveyance to commemorate the romantic dreams and the deadly realities of this historic course West.

Thanks to preservation efforts, 20th-century-adventurers are able to recapture much of the original mystique of the Oregon Trail.* They can gaze at Independence Rock as did Lydia who recorded in her diary, "I presume there are a million of names wrote on this rock...". They can travel along the river where the Rudds found "good grass and water grease for fule wood". They can take pause near Devil's Gate, which on July 5, 1852 inspired Lydia to write: "I went out to see this wonder and it surpassed anything that I ever saw in my life...".

It is true, of course, that the modern world has encroached upon the ambience of the Oregon Trail. Unlike the Rudds, today's travelers no doubt venture many more than three to ten miles a day. They do not pass other wayfarers digging graves for loved ones lost to the sickness in the plain. They do not forever leave behind family, cherished possessions, and friends. Many times, standing near ruts forged over a century ago, they experience what Lydia and Harry Rudd surely never imagined: power lines intruding on skyscapes, huge trucks speeding over paved highways, and subdivisions and smoke stacks breaking the smoothness of horizons.

Yet, in spite of these invasions and distinctive trademarks of the 1990s and even with some obvious failures, the Oregon Trail constitutes a Wyoming preservation success. While other exemplary and notable examples of our heritage are easily razed, permitted to deteriorate, or mangled by the latest fad in design or building materials, trail resources inspire loyalty and are—in more instances than not—preserved. Why has the Oregon Trail become a preservation accomplishment when so many important cultural resources have not?

Only a small part of the answer lies within the law and government activity. Federal legislation deals with cultural resources. It provides for a review and comment process which addresses the impact on cultural resources created by undertakings of federal agencies or their permittees. It sets out financial incentives available to owners for rehabilitation of historic properties. It establishes the prestigious National Register of Historic Places and National Landmark designations. But these laws apply to all cultural resources and are not specific to those associated with the Oregon Trail. In any case, federal law only promotes preservation; it does not in reality preclude the destruction of cultural sites.

On another level, Wyoming statues do provide for the maintenance of a few Oregon Trail related properties. But, while some state and local governments have adopted preservation legislation and their own financial incentive and designation programs in Wyoming, these laws are for all practical purposes non-existent.

It seems then that the answer to why many of the cultural resources associated with the Oregon Trail still exist lies in people. For it is popular interest and demand that have made the real difference in the preservation and protection of Wyoming's Oregon Trail sites.

*Across much of Wyoming, the Oregon Trail is congruent with the California, Mormon Pioneer, and Pony Express National Historic Trails. This discussion applies to sites and segments along all four trails—eds.

Beginning in the 1880s, people recognized the importance of this historic western passage. Groups held celebrations at significant points on the Trail and organized treks along the route. In the first decade of the 1900s, people and organizations began constructing protective barriers to shield pioneer graves and funding markers highlighting points of interest. Avid enthusiasts formed the Oregon-California Trails Association (OCTA), the membership of which now spans the United States.

This is not to say that trail preservationists and supporters have found their path to be smooth. Agencies, industry, and private owners sometimes cut swaths along trail ruts and downplay or ignore impacts to other trail resources. Government agencies charged with the maintenance of sites must fight for funding to perform their responsibilities. Still, the important point is that threats to trail resources spark protest. Many people put much energy into the preservation and documentation of Wyoming's historic trails. Now the question becomes: Why do these trail resources inspire public support while other cultural resources—an historic barn, a town's first phamacy, or the old movie theater—do not?

Perhaps the answer is found partly in progress and growth. Many trail ruts were lost when communities grew up over them. Trail river crossing sites were abandoned when they were no longer financially viable and are now deteriorated: the historic movie theater comes down to make way for a mini-mall. Maybe a desire to leave one's stamp on the world also plays a role in this scenario. Rocks onto which pioneers etched their names have been vandalized by new generations eager to carve their own marks: signatures of our particular times—such as gilt lattice work and metal siding—mask the original stone, brick, or wood of the town's first pharmacy.

Deeply incised trail ruts near Guernsey, Wyoming.1984 photo courtesy Richard Collier, Wyoming Division of Cultural Resources.

It could be that sheer numbers of people who perceive their lives as being affected by a resource determines what is preserved and what is not. Thousands of our forebears braved the hardships of the westering trails, and many credit these pioneers *en mass* with being not only the major impetus behind the westward expansion of the United States, but also the embodiment of the American dream of owning property and achieving wealth in a land of plenty. Although some of these same ancestors, individually or in small groups confronted numerous trials to build western communities and establish ranches or farms, perhaps these efforts are viewed as too localized to generate widespread enthusiasm for the sites which reflect this aspect of our heritage. Does the very nature and extent of our historic trails preclude provincialism?

Or, could it be that the myth of the West, via *Wagon Train*, *How the West was Won*, and other productions fires our preservation instincts and our willingness to honor buckskin-clad heroes and crinoline-skirted heroines? Certainly the image of James Stewart and Carole Baker boldly forging into untamed territory is more exciting than the picture of John Doe building the first general store in Anytown. Has Hollywood kept the Trail preservation momentum going?

Whatever the answer, it would give preservation and preservation planning a boost if we could isolate what motivates people to actively support particular cultural resources, bottle this phenomenon, and use it to foment our preservation programs.

Until that day, the best laid plans of mice and women may continue to go astray, just as did those of Lydia Rudd. Having survived the arduous wagon journey across plains and mountains, the Rudds reached Oregon in October of 1852. Lydia, who dreamed of owning land in her own right and evidently made the formidable trek with this plan in mind, notes in her diary that husband Harry became a partner in a mercantile business instead of acquiring property under the Donation Land Act of 1850 (which would have allowed him to claim 320 acres for her as his wife). Concludes Lydia, "I expect that we shall not make a claim after all our trouble in getting here on purpose for one... I shall have to be poor and dependent on a man my [whole] life time."

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